

Peters addresses many of these caveats, the overall focus of the book is on middle class mothers. Ultimately, as Peters consistently point out, the final solution to the problems facing all mothers today is radical social and political change in the workplace and in business and government responsibility towards families.

Mothering and Ambivalence

Wendy Hollway and Brid Featherstone, Eds.
London: Routledge, 1997.

Reviewed by Astrid Henry

Motherhood, it is often noted, poses a problem for feminists. From the repudiation of motherhood found in early second wave texts such as Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, to the celebration of it that followed only shortly thereafter in books like Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, feminists have struggled with how to theorize the experience of mothering. As these earlier works suggest, feminism has not escaped the tendency toward either denigrating or idealizing motherhood that characterizes so much of popular discourse about mothers. *Mothering and Ambivalence*, edited by Wendy Hollway and Brid Featherstone, forcefully argues that both the impulse to denigrate mothers and the desire to idealize them spring from the same source: an inability to recognize ambivalence, whether the mother's ambivalence about her child, the child's ambivalence about her mother, or society's ambivalence about motherhood generally. As Featherstone writes in her introduction to this anthology, "Mothering is not all joy, but it is not all sorrow either. Let us hold on to both; let us not deny the ambivalence, either in practice or in theory" (1997: 12).

The eleven new essays which make up this volume address a wide range of issues pertaining to mothering, including: mother-daughter relations; the role of fathers; the ways in which race, class, and nationality reflect the experience of mothering; single parenting; mothers who are violent and abusive; and the psychodynamics of divorce. Written primarily by therapists and social workers about their clinical experience, these writers persuasively argue that psychoanalysis—and by that they mean primarily object-relations theory—is the one theory that can help us get beyond the cultural and psychological impasses blocking a more complete and complex understanding of motherhood. One of the most interesting aspects of this book, in fact, is its insistence that we must, as feminists, reclaim psychoanalysis in order to transcend the polarization that typifies so much of the debate about mothering.

The theorist whose work is perhaps most central to this volume is the American psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, whose writing on maternal subjec-

Book Reviews

tivity is cited in many of these essays. The difficulty of articulating this maternal subjectivity, whether in the therapeutic setting or within feminist discourse, has left the experience of mothering and all its contradictions in the hands of others, to be described, yet again, in the most idealistic or denigrated terms. As these writers argue, it is only by recognizing the mother's subjectivity—her autonomy, her sexuality, her ambivalence—that the institution of motherhood will ever change. It is imperative that feminists rejoin the debate about the changing institutions of motherhood and the family. As Susie Orbach argues in an interview compiled in this volume, "We ought not to keep relinquishing ground and letting the Right run the debate on this" (91). At a time when conservatives on the Right seem to have all but taken over contemporary discourse on the family, this book provides a useful intervention.

Engendering Motherhood: Identity and Self-Transformation in Women's Lives

Martha McMahon
New York: Guilford Press, 1995

Reviewed by Erin E. MacDonald

Martha McMahon's book is based on her Ph.D. research as a feminist sociologist. Using a social interactionist approach that emphasizes qualitative data, her findings are based on what participants told her about their lives. From 1988 to 1989, she recorded both on paper and on microcassette the experiences of 59 full-time working Toronto mothers of preschool-aged children, both those with and those without partners. Although her original intention was to explore the balance of work and childcare in these working- and middle-class mothers' lives, McMahon focused her attention instead on the identity-transforming influence of having children, because the mother-child relationship was considered of the greatest value to the participants. Including a wealth of charts and statistics to support her findings, the author presents a convincing and thought-provoking new study of an old theme. While past feminists tended to concentrate on the oppression of women as housewives, she turns her attention to the symbolic and real importance of the mother-child relationship in these women's lives. Her book moves through an analysis of "the social processes through which women became pregnant and sustained their pregnancies through to motherhood" (McMahon, 1995: 15) to an analysis in the final chapters of "the processes whereby these women developed conceptions of themselves as mothers" (McMahon, 1995: 15).